

The UK's First National Security Strategy: A Critical and Selective Evaluation

*Frank Gregory**

Theme: In March 2008 the Prime Minister presented in Parliament the National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom, a plan that includes counter-terrorist and civil contingencies dimensions.

Summary: The UK's first National Security Strategy (UK NSS, published in March 2008) which covers what are now recognised as the much expanded inter-connected domains of internal and external security is critically reviewed as a belated response to the 'new security agenda' (Buzan, 1983). The analysis uses Edwards (2007) set of key questions as a framework to examine prioritisation, inter-agency response integration, risk awareness and management, response leadership and accountability. The analysis notes that, despite the breadth of issue coverage in the UK NSS, the strategy is currently very heavily weighted in both focus and content detail towards the counter-terrorism strategy ('Contest') both as a priority issue area and as offering transferable 'best practice' to some non counter-terrorist (CT) issue areas. This ARI paper will, first, highlight the CT aspects of the NSS, secondly, identify the wider but related civil contingencies aspects of the NSS and, thirdly, focus on issues of UK NSS implementation and accountability.

Analysis: For much of the post-World War II era the concept and promulgation of a specifically titled 'national security strategy' has been very much symbolised by US practice following its post-WWII National Security Act. By contrast, recent UK practice, in a more fragmented fashion, was to have a 'foreign policy', a 'defence policy' and since 2003 a specific 'counter-terrorism' strategy, known as 'Contest' and an updated civil emergencies framework set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

Within UK government policy and practice it had long been customary to refer to 'national security' mainly in the context of threats from foreign powers to the security of Britain as a state. The term is also used in a more narrow sense to refer to the objectives of the duties of the UK's security and intelligence services (MI5, MI6, GCHQ and the police Special Branches). However, the publication, in March 2008, of the UK's first 'National Security Strategy' (UK NSS) acknowledges that 'Over recent decades, our view of national security has broadened to include threats to individual citizens and to our way of life, as well as to the integrity and interests of the state'.¹ In many ways the UK NSS seems to be a belated

* Professor of European Security, School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton.

¹ Cabinet Office, 'The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom, security in an interdependent world', Cm. 7291, The Stationery Office, March 2008, para 1.5, accessed 1/VI/2008 through http://interactive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/documents/security/national_security_strategy.pdf.

high-level recognition that contemporary security concerns go beyond the traditional confines of 'hard security' and now encompass 'soft security' areas such as trans-national crime, the environment and terrorism, which were identified in the 1980s by Buzan and others² and often called the 'new security agenda'. Prior to the publication of the UK NSS, these new security concerns were gradually permeating, in a rather *ad hoc* fashion, UK defence policy and the emerging updated policies on civil contingencies. For example, in 2002 the UK's Strategic Defence Review's 'New Chapter' made specific reference to the military's contribution to counter-terrorism (CT).

In the wider EU context the UK NSS is one among a number of such policy documents now being produced by EU Member States. In particular, the 2004 and 2007 entrants have seen their alignment to NATO and EU policy requirements as necessitating the development of a specific and wide-ranging NSS under the provisions of their constitutional law. For example, the Polish Government's National Security Strategy (2007) refers to the fact that its goals are derived from the articulation of its national interests in the Polish Constitution. Hungary describes its NSS as deriving from Resolution No. 94/1998(XII.29) of the Hungarian National Assembly on 'The Basic Principles of the Security and Defence Policy of the Republic of Hungary' which makes the Hungarian Government responsible for the National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy.³ Moreover, Hungary states that its NSS is in line with NATO's 1999 strategic concept and the EU's European Security Strategy. These approaches to a national security strategy can be seen as a sort of *gründnorm*-based approach.

By contrast the UK appears to have adopted, by the production of its first NSS, a sort of *ex post facto* rationalisation based upon the existence of a number of existing discrete initiatives, such as the 'Contest' CT strategy. It might also be seen as part of the Prime Minister Gordon Brown's attempts to foster a greater political and public consensus on CT, than was achieved by Tony Blair, by placing the CT response within a wider framework of security concerns.⁴ These wider concerns are expressed as follows in the NSS:

'The Cold War threat has been replaced by a diverse but interconnected set of threats and risks, which affect the United Kingdom directly and also have the potential to undermine wider international political stability. They include international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, conflicts and failed states, pandemics, and trans-national crime. These and other threats and risks are driven by a diverse set of underlying factors, including climate change, competition for energy, poverty and poor governance, demographic changes and globalisation' (UK NSS, para 1.3).

The aim of the NSS, in the above context is said to be 'to set out how we will address and manage this diverse though interconnected set of security challenges and underlying drivers' (UK NSS, para 1.4). Moreover, all the NSSs of the EU Member States referred to, recognise the clear interrelationship of the domains of internal and external security and that their issue content goes far beyond the traditional confines of military conflict or terrorism.

² *People States & Fear*, 1983, and *Regions and Powers – The Structure of International Security*, 2003.

³ Hungarian Government, 'The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Hungary', http://www.mfa.gov.hu/kum/en/bal/foreign_policy/security_policy/national_sec_strat, accessed 1/IV/2008.

⁴ For a detailed conceptual critique of this type of strategy document see the discussion of the EU's CT strategy in R. Bossong, 'The Action Plan on Combating Terrorism: A Flawed Instrument of EU Security Governance', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 46 (1), January 2008, p. 27-48.

In February 2007 the UK think-tank Demos published a report titled 'The Case for a National Security Strategy', which focused on the situation in the UK.⁵ The Report suggested a number of criteria by which an NSS could be evaluated. These points, together with some other critiques of the UK NSS which have been produced since its publication, will be used to provide the critical framework for this paper. Drawing on the risks associated 'with the lack of a holistic approach by government to national security', identified as a generic problem in a Dutch official review, the Demos Report suggested that the UK NSS should be assessed from the perspective of its possible contribution to resolving the following issues:

- Does the NSS offer the prospect for developing a more integrated response framework?
- Does it adequately provide for mechanisms to recognise and raise awareness of the early signs of new threats or hazards?
- Does it recognise and seek to address any deficiencies in risk analysis and risk identification?
- Does it contain a clearly thought out method of prioritisation?
- Does it offer an adequate leadership model?

This ARI concentrates primarily on the CT aspects but also discusses the CT aspects within a wider UK civil contingencies response context, which was most recently set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. This paper will, first, highlight the CT aspects of the NSS, secondly, identify the wider but related civil contingencies aspect of the NSS and, thirdly, focus on issues of UK NSS implementation and accountability.

Under its 'Guiding Principles' the UK NSS states:

'At home, our aim should be that people are able to go about their business without fear and with reasonable assurance of safety. Some risk is inevitable, and the Government's role is to minimise and anticipate it... In a wider interdependent world, we cannot opt out of overseas engagement. But overseas especially we need to be realistic, and set realistic expectations, about what we can achieve' (UK NSS, para 2.2).

The UK NSS, CT and the Wider Security Agenda: A Blueprint for Prioritisation and an Integrated Response Framework?

In a sense, the way the NSS is written suggests by both textual space allocation and order of issue treatment that the 'method of prioritisation' is almost solely defined by a form of Prime Ministerial-led political agenda from Blair to Brown that places CT as the top priority. In this context, one can suggest that this prioritisation also reflects the influence of 'Contest' and recent national security reforms such as the setting up of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), the establishment of the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) within the Home Office and the provision of a new single Security and Intelligence budget, which all serve to privilege the packaging of information on the terrorism threat to Ministers, in both its wider and narrower meanings. By contrast, no similar high-profile strategies or organisational changes are to be found relating to, for example, climate change. Moreover, in its itemisation of national security reforms since 2001 it is noteworthy that six of the items relate to CT, one relates to trans-national organised crime and none relate to other new concerns like pandemics and flooding, that also appear in the UK NSS. Indeed, it is also rather surprising that the major piece of

⁵ C. Edwards, 'The Case for a National Security Strategy', Demos Report, DEMOS, February 2007.

general underpinning legislation relating to many aspects of the 'new security agenda' including terrorism, the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, is not given greater prominence whilst the CT legal process is accorded a bullet point of its own in the UK NSS.

Indeed, the Government seems to see its developing multi-sector approach to CT as a model capable of wider application in the national security sphere. The NSS states that the Government 'will build on the coalition of public, private and third sectors already involved in counter-terrorism... [and] work with owners or operators to protect critical sites and essential services; with businesses to improve resilience; with local authorities and communities to plan for emergencies and to counter violent extremism' (UK NSS, para 2.5). Moreover, in the specific identification of 'Security Challenges', whilst terrorism; weapons of mass destruction (WMD), trans-national organised crime and global instability and conflict receive separate sections, everything else is lumped under 'civil emergencies'. Under 'civil emergencies' we are told that the Government monitors 'closely the risks of infectious disease, extreme weather, and man-made emergencies' (UK NSS, para 3.22). In one sense, this is an oddly disjointed series of listings because two of the civil emergencies can be related to climate change, which the Government later recognises as 'potentially the greatest challenge to global security and stability' (UK NSS, para 3.34). Moreover, to add further confusion in terms of priority, in his Statement to the House of Commons on the NSS, Brown, referring to security challenges to UK citizens, there states that 'the most serious and urgent remains the threat from international terrorism'.⁶

In summary, the UK NSS does not contain or even refer to a clear methodology for NSS issue prioritisation. Although, as Feakin notes,⁷ it does recognise 'interconnectivity' in its widest senses in relation to threats, risks and drivers and modes of governance response, he sees the NSS as the 'genesis of pan-governmental joined up thinking on security'. However, UK governance is littered with recognitions of the need for inter-agency working and evidence of the failures to implement these requirements, as Cornish notes: 'Cross-governmental policy initiatives are fraught with difficulty, and often only survive at the lowest level of the lowest common policy denominator'.⁸ A good example of this problem of cross-governmental policy delivery is provided by the implementation implications of the Prime Minister's statement that the Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be reporting on additional measures 'that we propose for young people in colleges and universities, in prisons and working in faith communities to disrupt the promoters of violent extremism, all building on the support of the vast majority of people of all faiths and all backgrounds who condemn terrorism'. These proposed measures imply the provision of integrated working by a very diverse collection of public sector and private sector policy actors.

Risk/Threat Awareness: Analysis and Management

In general, the UK NSS is all about 'issue awareness', as it devotes much space to identifying all the currently conceivable *risks*, *threats* and *challenges*. However, none of the three terms in italics are actually defined in the NSS and they seem to be used in a

⁶ Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Statement to the House of Commons, 'National Security Strategy', House of Commons Hansard Debates, 19/III/2008, cols. 925-929, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansard/cm0821319/debtext/80>, accessed 9/IV/2008.

⁷ T. Feakin, 'The National Security Strategy – The Golden Thread of Interconnectivity', RUSI, 2008.

⁸ P. Cornish, 'The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom – How Radical Can it Be?', Experts' Comment Chatham House, 26/III/2008, <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/media/comment/nss/>, accessed 9/IV/2008.

rather random fashion in the text, although Endnote 3 does refer to the meanings of the five national threat levels in relation to a possible terrorist attack. Elsewhere, for example, trans-national crime, pandemics and flooding are described as both threats and challenges. Thus a number of commentators, including the Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, have described the NSS as more of a 'list' in relation to the issues raised rather than a clear strategy to tackle the issue.⁹ In one sense, therefore, NSS does show quite a good issue awareness, but that is only at a very basic level, for instance, discussions of rising energy demands and population pressures. In the NSS, assessments of responses, in terms of the identification, analysis and managements of issues which might be variously classed as threats, risks or challenges, show a variability of depth of response across what are called the major security challenges. This is shown in the sections below.

- In counter-terrorism, reference is made to: organisational structures such as JTAC, the multi-departmental Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), the OSCT, the 'Contest' (4Ps) Strategy and the CT & Intelligence budget, while a six-point 'future priorities' programme is identified.
- In countering the WMD threat, reference is made to: an approach that is 'fully integrated across Government' (UK NSS, para 4.16) and involves working with partners outside the UK and in the private sector. The approach is described by four 'Ds' (Dissuade, Detect, Deny and Defend) and has a six-point 'future priorities' programme.
- In tackling trans-national organised crime, reference is made to: rising police numbers, the recent formation of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) and the Borders and Immigration Agency (BIA) and adapting 'Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements' (UK NSS, para 4.28) from their original usage in tackling sexual and violent offenders to target organised crime and this challenge has a four point 'future priorities' programme.
- In tackling global instability, conflict and failed and fragile states, reference is made to: the optimum of a multilateral approach, the need for 'early and continuing analysis and understanding', a strengthened UK capacity to monitor effects of UK actions and 'more systematically learn the lessons of our experience' (UK NSS, para 4.39). In other respects, the response is more 'case-by-case', for example, the new 2007 UK strategy for Afghanistan and a three-year commitment of £243 million to security and economic stability in the Occupied Palestine Territories. Future funding is smaller than for CT, with £269 million in a Stabilisation Aid Fund supported by a Stabilisation Unit drawn from the Foreign, Defence and Overseas Development Ministries and a three-year £327 million Conflict Prevention Pool managed jointly by the same Ministries. This challenge has a six-point 'future priorities' programme attached to it but these are very general, for example: 'building the capacity of weak states and regional organisations to prevent and resolve conflicts' (UK NSS, p. 61).
- In planning for civil emergencies and resilience, reference is made to: the response framework set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004; a nationwide resilience network coordinated by the Cabinet Office; assessing, planning and building capacity to tackle flooding (reference is made to the Pitt Review on the 2007 floods)¹⁰ and pandemics in the UK; and the publication, in 2008, of a

⁹ 'Brown unveils national security strategy', *Public Servant Daily*, 19/III/2008, http://www.publicservice.co.uk/news_story.asp?id=5476, accessed 16/VI/2008.

¹⁰ Sir Michael Pitt, 'The Pitt Review: Lessons Learned from the 2007 Floods', June 2008.

national-level risk register and a review and possible strengthening of the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act. These matters are all reflected in a five-point 'future priorities programme'.

By contrast, the challenges of 'tackling climate change', 'tackling energy security' and 'tackling poverty, inequality, and poor governance' are much less well articulated in terms of response, although reference is made, for example, to a systematic and detailed analysis of climate change effects on the UK (with £100 million for research over five years) and reference is made to an 'integrated energy strategy' that, however, has an extremely broad agenda, much of which is outside the UK's direct control (UK NSS, paras 4.89-4.90).

Conclusions

Does the UK NSS Offer a Clear Leadership Model Over the Range of Identified Issues?

The UK NSS and associated documentation¹¹ at present offers a leadership model that is currently rather heavily weighted towards the more traditional understandings of security and counter-terrorism. At the top is the National Security Committee set up in 2007 and chaired by the Prime Minister, but one can question how this will relate in non-defence or terrorism areas to the 'lead department' model for risk identification, analysis and response as set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. A Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI) was established in 2007 as an interdepartmental organisation but its remit is again weighted as it only provides 'advice on information, physical and personnel security to businesses and organisations across the national infrastructure' (UK NSS, para 4.106). Although the Government plans to give the Intelligence and Security Committee of parliamentarians a more public and enhanced scrutiny role, its remit still remains focussed on the more traditional security areas of espionage, WMD threats and terrorism.

The structures and systems necessary to address the full range of 'new security agenda' challenges identified in the UK NSS are, as yet, much more embryonic in form. Thus we are told in the UK NSS that:

- Cabinet secretariats are being reviewed to improve organisation working coherence and effectiveness across government –but this is a goal that has been stated many times before: is it deliverable?–.
- Still in the consideration stage is an aspiration to look at how to strengthen 'the Government's capacity for horizon-scanning, forward-planning and early warning to identify, measure, and monitor risks and threats'.
- A national security forum is planned with a membership drawn from 'business, academics, community organisations and military and security experts from outside Government' to advise the National Security Committee but, as yet, there are no details of its remit or structure.
- A National Risk Register, updated annually, is planned.

A key requirement in respect of this wide-agenda NSS and its accompanying systems is a mechanism to hold Government accountable for the implementation of this ambitious strategy. At present this would depend upon the rather disparate scrutiny practices of Commons' departmental select committees and the reviews carried out by the Commons'

¹¹ See Prime Minister Gordon Brown's 'Statement on Security' to Parliament of 25/VII/2007.

Public Accounts Committee on the basis of reports from the National Audit Office. However, the UK NSS does hold out the prospect of the creation of a 'joint Parliamentary National Security Committee to help monitor the implementation and development of this strategy' (UK NSS, p. 60). At present, as Cornish has pointed out, the UK NSS has too much description in its content. We await the articulation of a much more specific strategy for implementation for which the Government can be held accountable, in their spheres of responsibility, for matters such as the fact that over 4,000 UK households are still in temporary accommodation after the summer 2007 floods. This represents a degree of human suffering that would have received much higher political and public attention had it been terrorist-related.

Frank Gregory
Professor of European Security, School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton